

the press and the poor

a report by the
national council of welfare
on how canada's newspapers
cover poverty

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"A new bill of rights for the poor must be preceded by a fundamental change in the prevailing public attitude towards those who live below the poverty level. Many cherished myths ... must be given final public burial."

Report of the Special Senate
Committee on Poverty (1971)

"It is difficult to know what one is talking about if one has failed to receive the relevant information."

Report of the Task Force on
Government Information (1969)

In the three years of its existence the National Council of Welfare, in its capacity as an advisory body to the Minister of National Health and Welfare, has issued reports on a variety of subjects relating to poverty in Canada. These reports have dealt with income security, with community employment, with legal services, with nutrition and with a range of related subjects. For the most part these have been very widely reported and have generated a substantial public response.

The extent of this response has varied from city to city, closely reflecting the extent of the press coverage given the particular study or report. And the nature of the response has reflected the nature of the coverage. Where a sensational seeming interpretation was given to a statement in one of our reports it invariably generated a host of letters,

attacking or congratulating us on what we hadn't said. Increasingly we became aware that while, through our reports, we were seeking to talk to the people of Canada, we in fact were able to talk only to several dozen media who, in turn, talked to the people of Canada.

There is, of course, nothing unique about our situation in this regard. On the contrary, as a national body whose existence had been legislated by Parliament, we have found ourselves almost uniquely fortunate in the extent to which we have been able to be heard through the media when we spoke. But, how many other voices are heard when poverty is spoken of, and which voices? What are they heard to say, and in what context are they heard to say it?

To what extent are the "cherished myths" that the Senate Committee said would need be buried if poverty is to be eliminated in Canada the inevitable products of people having "failed to receive the relevant information"? To what extent are they the products of people having received wrong information? Incomplete information? One-sided information? Does the press shape public attitudes about the extent and nature of poverty in Canada by what it prints and doesn't print or does it simply reflect these attitudes? In short, how does the press in Canada cover poverty and with what results?

THE VIEW FROM THE NEWSROOM

The National Council of Welfare asked National Newspaper Award winner Ron Haggart, a former columnist on social affairs for (at various times) all three major dailies

in Toronto and now executive editor of CITY television, to examine this question for us. His findings, drawn from the perspective of some twenty years in the newsroom, were that the press indeed portrays poverty through the prism of a bias; not a conscious bias and not a malicious bias, but nonetheless a bias. He calls it the bias of "them" and "us", and suggests that it is readily remediable; but only if its existence is recognized and its antidote consciously applied. This is what he had to say about how the press covers poverty.

The first threshold in considering press coverage of the poverty community is not how the press covers poverty, but whether it does. An examination of current practices on Canadian newspapers reveals a clear schism. The newspapers with specialist reporters concentrating full or part-time on the poverty community tend to be in the largest metropolitan areas. With only a few notable and honourable exceptions, such as Quebec City's Le Soleil, urban centres of importance, but of less than first rank, tend to cover poverty news if and when it crosses the established lines of journalistic structure. When the poor are at City Hall, they encounter the City Hall reporter; when they are arrested, they encounter the court reporter; when their cause reaches the political level, they encounter the legislative or parliamentary reporters.

Primarily, this is a matter of economics. It can also be argued, and no doubt many Canadian editors instinctively believe, that it is in the best interests of the poor not to "ghettoize" them by assigning a specific reporter to their concerns. After all, the poor are supposed to be treated just like other citizens, aren't they?

The trouble with this rationale is that "treating the poor like other citizens" is the very act which tends to ghettoize them in the pages of the press. Reporters and editors live in a world of middle-class social values. When a "general" reporter goes out to gather facts within the poverty

community, he finds himself in situations with which he is likely to have no personal experience.

When, during the March school holiday in 1972, charter-flight passengers by the thousands packed into Toronto International Airport, that situation was not just on the front page of the Globe and Mail, it was the top story on Page One. Newspaper employees could understand the plight of those who take cold-weather holidays, and they could assume that most of their readers could also understand.

The point-of-view is considerably different when the situation at hand is, for example, a delay in issuing Unemployment Insurance cheques to thousands of jobless. The point-of-view in this instance is from the outside looking in. This is a subtle judgement, but a basic one nonetheless: When newspapers are reporting the holiday crowds at an airport, it is a report on "us". When newspapers are reporting delays in issuing Unemployment Insurance cheques (probably affecting many thousands more than the crowds at the airport) the report is about "them".

Newspapers still represent the most direct and efficient means of mass communication. Whatever the technological brilliance of radio and television, that technology often stands in the way of transmitting information. A trusted, competent and relatively unobtrusive newspaper reporter may be able to describe graphically the frustrations of waiting for hours in a welfare office. A television film maker, whatever his other qualities, can seldom be unobtrusive. Television especially has become a medium of "official" news. Cabinet ministers and aldermen become accustomed to the demands of the camera. When television does gather its immense resources to focus attention on issues at other than the "official" level, its impact is without equal. But public attitudes are also conditioned by the steady, day-in and day-out reporting of current events and situations. For this task, television is superb for reporting a man on the moon, but (so far at least) unequal to the task of reporting the poor at home. This

more subtle task, because it seldom involves quick and physical acts suitable for the camera, is still a task more suitable for the newspaper.

There is danger, however, in expecting too much from the press. Among the usual sources of news information, only the print press, and particularly the newspaper, has a direct commercial relationship with its consumers. The daily newspaper is, therefore, especially sensitive to reader response. The daily newspaper cannot be too far away from the community consensus on any particular issue. It is easy to assume that as the number of monopoly and near-monopoly situations evolve in Canada, the newspaper press is able to do as it pleases. Experience in the real world discloses that the opposite is more likely to be the case.

When a newspaper achieves a monopoly or near-monopoly position, it also acquires a broader community base which it is expected to serve and from which it must judge the community consensus. Gone are the peccadillos of the Vancouver Sun under R. J. Cromie or the Toronto Star under H. D. Hindmarsh. Both are "better" newspapers by any of the usual standards of judgement, but neither feels free in the 1970's to engage in the audacious experimentation which characterized both papers when neither held an afternoon monopoly. In a word, monopoly newspapers become more bland. When newspapers become bland, it is the poor who will suffer, because the poor do not fit into the mainstream of a materialistic, middle-class society.

Those who expect a high degree of social leadership from the press must remember that the press is a part of the social fabric of each community. However much local leaders may from time to time rail against 'the local rag' the press is itself a social institution and generally speaking reflects the values and expectations of the existing power structure. If the reporter who writes about national affairs is considered in his peer group to enjoy greater stature than the reporter who writes of local

affairs, it follows that the reporter who writes of virtually nameless people in the poverty community enjoys a stature not far removed from his subjects. This can have an important effect at the City Desk where the decisions are made as to what story is given prominence, what story is severely edited and buried on the inside pages, and what story gets dropped entirely because of limitations of space.

It is generally assumed on newspapers that the status among reporters ascends from the City Hall beat, to the provincial legislature, to the national reporter in Ottawa, to the reporter assigned overseas. While there are obviously some regional exceptions to this hierarchical order, it is nonetheless generally accepted that a reporter, even if not specifically assigned to one of these beats, enjoys an increasing status as he moves "up the line". The journalistic hierarchical structure in this way parallels the existing political power structure. From this it flows that a reporter assigned to the "poverty beat" may feel shunted aside from the mainstream of his profession.

Newspaper editors, perplexed by the demands to cover the poverty community in a new way, would therefore be well advised to search for poverty reporters with a personal dedication to the subject and a willingness to stand aside from the traditional newsroom hierarchical structure. It is noteworthy that among the best poverty reporter specialists in both language groups, a common characteristic is the sense of dedication.

This sense of dedication is not necessarily directed toward the specific political goals to be found in the poverty community; rather, it is a dedication to the concept that those who are powerless should have equal access to the facilities of a free press and should have skilled technicians (the reporter) to assist them in that attainment. It is demonstrably true that the newspapers of Canada have far more editorial employees knowledgeable of the

oil and gas industries and the stock market than they have employees with insights into the facts of the poverty community. It is demonstrably true and it is indefensible.

Two principles of public policy are involved when the press fails to report adequately from the poverty community. The right to a free press is not a right vested in the press itself, which does not enjoy and does not claim any rights not enjoyed by the people generally. A free press is a right which vests in the people; it is their right to know that is important. When the poverty community is inadequately covered by the press, it is the general public interest which is violated. Pleading for coverage of the poverty community is not, therefore, special interest pleading, because the real issue at stake is the general public's right to be informed in an important area of social and political concern.

A second consideration involves the rights of the poor themselves. A measure of their poverty is their lack of access to the resources of the community. The responsibility of the press is to report and analyze that lack of access to the resources of the community, not above all, to become part of that problem itself. A reflective editor will pause to consider how much space in his paper is consumed by the discussion of relatively obscure amendments to corporate tax legislation compared to the amount of space consumed by discussion and analysis originating in the ranks of the poor. A free press, once again, is not a right of the press; it is a right of the people. A free press must mean, among other things, an equal right of access to the press.

The right of equal access does not for a moment diminish the publisher's right to exercise independent editorial judgement. The right of equal access to the press means as much, and no less, than it says: In practical terms it means the right to have the voices of the poverty community heard in the editorial room through the agency of skilled and knowledgeable reporters and editors. The best interests of the poverty community

cannot be served by demands for a certain amount of space, a predetermined number of column inches, to be devoted to the cause. The objective is to attract readers, not inches, and editorial judgements are still best left to professionals who are adequately supplied with information. Great amounts of space prepared in any other way are liable to be great amounts of space largely unread, and that serve no one's interest. The failure of the press is only partly its failure to inform others; its greatest failure is its failure to inform itself.

The press of Canada is almost entirely free of corruption. The influence of advertisers is usually more amusing than threatening: In most cities it is confined to a few puff stories reporting retirement parties at a local auto dealership. The influence of advertisers, whatever the widespread mythology, stems more from the fact that advertisers are large institutions than from any direct threat of economic sanction.

While the press of Canada may be incorruptible in ordinary terms, the failure of the press to inform itself adequately about the poverty community does have an economic base. Viewed from the perspective of cost, there are two kinds of news: There is "automatic" news, and there is news which an editor and reporter have to look for, that is to say, "digging" news. Meetings of the City Council, sports events, and service club luncheon speeches are "automatic" news. Assigning a reporter to them will almost always result in a usable story; the story written can be expanded easily to fill the space available. There is almost no risk of wasting time (and therefore money).

The "digging" story is a speculative investment. It involves the commitment of considerable time for research and interviews. Many persons so interviewed will be unaccustomed to dealing with the press and the reporter's time may not be always used with utmost efficiency. The outcome of this speculative investment cannot always be surely predicted in advance, which exerts pressure

not to undertake the research in the first place.

It is a safe assumption that many newspapers which appear biased unfavorably toward the poverty community, either by what they do publish or by what they do not publish, are not so much biased in the apparent direction as they are biased against the "digging" type of news story. If a newspaper devotes itself largely to "automatic" news (e.g. the City Council and service clubs) it will, in the poverty field, have a supply of news emanating almost entirely from official sources, or its main supply of news will be from sources or events antagonistic or irrelevant to poverty considerations.

News coverage of the poverty community which is comprehensive, adequate and accurate must include a considerable portion of "digging" journalism. Without it, press attention will be confined to an official, that is to say, administrative view of poverty, with its necessary attention to costs, rather than benefits, to inter-governmental affairs and to fraud and over-payment. All these subjects have their place, but unless the press digs for the stories which show the real results of social programs, the overview provided by the press will be distinctly one-sided.

Ken Kelly is now the director of Information Services for the federal government's new Ministry of State for Science and Technology. Before that he reported on health, welfare and science for the Canadian Press' Ottawa bureau. We asked him how he thought the press in Canada covered poverty. His answer was very interesting. While sharing Ron Haggart's view of the need of specialized, digging reportage of poverty, he drove home the harsh price that is paid for the failure of the press to provide this. His message, in effect, was that if the press doesn't dig, it won't find the skeletons that governments will choose to bury.

Ron Haggart's analysis of the reasons for the press' behaviour is pretty accurate in my 20-odd years' experience as a daily newspaper and wire service reporter. The time needed to become expert and to do the required digging is begrudged the reporter who seeks to develop the poverty beat. But this is perhaps not the full story.

In my view, our system of government had militated against more exposure of the criminal neglect of the poor of this country for so many years. The necessity of the federal government to have the cooperation of provincial governments to implement even the most modest changes in welfare legislation has gone a long way to aiding a conspiracy of silence against the helpless state of the poor.

Where the press' failure was a failure to dig for the facts, the bureaucracy's failure has been one of suppression of unpleasant inadequacies in implementation of the law. This has happened not because bureaucrats are heartless or evil but because they need cooperation. And this need seemed to dictate that federal bureaucrats never disclose the facts of inaction of their provincial counterparts and vice versa.

If anyone doubts that, let him examine the record of the Canada Assistance Plan. It took years before public attention was directed to the nearly-universal failure of the provinces to provide effective appeals procedures in welfare cases, in spite of the fact that the provision of such appeals was a condition for the provinces to collect millions of dollars in federal money. They collected the millions year after year while ignoring the appeals requirement. Only when it was clear that a reporter had finally stumbled on their failure did the federal authorities begin to make public noises aimed at forcing the provinces to live up to their pledged word. Yet federal authorities had known all along which provinces set up "phoney" appeals procedures and which set up none at all. The violation of their signed word by the provinces was winked at by federal authorities in the name of federal-provincial cooperation.

Whenever these things were discussed among governments it was always at conferences where reporters were carefully excluded. It was only the occasional breath of exposure - especially in the hey-day of the welfare rights movement - that managed to rock this comfortable boat. Systematic exposure of the lack of appeals procedures eventually forced most provinces to keep their word and render their systems more just.

Of course, the exposure came years too late to help hundreds of welfare recipients victimized by arbitrary or unfair administrative decisions and robbed of their right to appeal. And no amount of exposure has helped to change welfare laws which force needy mothers with families to conceal extra earnings because the allowable incomes lag so far behind the escalating cost of living. A vigilant press and a less secretive bureaucracy could have spared, and still could spare, thousands of Canadians from hardships that arise from weaknesses in our social and economic systems.

But perhaps the press' poor record in poverty reporting reflects a fairly common attitude of our affluent society. It may be that most Canadians still regard the poor as the authors of their own misfortune. The welfare bum is a common stereotype applied to the poor by many in society. Perhaps society shuns any serious effort to examine that stereotype because close scrutiny might disclose how closely "they" resemble "us".

It's a bit uncomfortable thinking that our homes, our apartments, our cars and our trips are ours more by good fortune than some inborn virtue in ourselves. That the poor are poor because of circumstances over which they had little or no control may be just too much for "us" to face. But is it harder to accept than the fact that the poor, firmly locked in cultural and spiritual deprivation, will be poor forever and that our slender efforts to help them exist will be waste-fully exploited?

If the press is to look more deeply into poverty in the future, it will only do so because the

public insists, for the press remains the mirror of society.

THE RISE AND FALL OF POVERTY REPORTING

Until the appearance of the Economic Council of Canada's Fifth Annual Review in August 1968, there was little public awareness of the existence of widespread poverty in Canada. The Economic Council's report therefore struck like a bombshell:

Poverty in Canada is real. Its numbers are not in the thousands, but the millions. There is more of it than our society can tolerate, more than our economy can afford, and far more than existing measures and efforts can cope with. Its persistence, at a time when the bulk of Canadians enjoy one of the highest standards of living in the world, is a disgrace.

Among the proposals made by the Economic Council was that the Senate "consider the advisability of creating a committee to enquire into the problems of poverty in Canada". A bare three months later the Special Senate Committee on Poverty was constituted under the Chairmanship of Senator David Croll. Its mandate: "to investigate and report upon all aspects of poverty in Canada ... to define and elucidate the problems of poverty in Canada, and to recommend appropriate action to ensure the establishment of a more effective structure of remedial measures".

These two successive events, the Economic Council of Canada report and the creation of the Croll Committee, were substantially responsible for the creation of poverty

beats by major Canadian newspapers and news services. At the Toronto Star, David Allen, a senior reporter (he now heads the Star's provincial legislature bureau) was assigned full-time to poverty reporting. He was given a travel budget sufficient to enable him to travel across Canada with the Senate Committee and attend hearings wherever they were held. He was even provided with a research budget in order that the Star could have its own source of primary research into poverty questions. He was also assured that his feature reports would not be subject to desk editing without his being consulted.

Newspapers, both French and English, in major centers such as Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto and Montreal, and in such smaller centers as Quebec City, and London, Ontario, established poverty beats on full-time and part-time bases. The Ottawa bureaus of Canadian Press and of Southam News Service both designated part-time poverty specialists. When, for example, the Federal-Provincial Conference of Welfare Ministers took place in Victoria, British Columbia, in September 1969, it was covered not by west coast correspondents of Canadian Press and Southam, but by their poverty specialists from Ottawa. When events such as the June 1970 Canadian Conference on Social Welfare and the January 1971 Poor People's Conference took place in Toronto, poverty reporters from as far afield as Winnipeg and Vancouver were on hand.

In 1971 this growth of specialization in poverty reporting began to reverse itself. It is difficult to pinpoint a precise moment in time or specific event which initiated this winding back down of the process, but that the process did reverse itself is unquestionable. Perhaps

it was the dull thud with which the much vaunted Federal Government White Paper on Income Security landed in late 1970, rejecting major income security initiatives in favour of modest tinkering; perhaps it was the crescendo of official and public silence which swallowed the report of the Special Senate Committee on Poverty a year later. Perhaps it was a response to the so-called "welfare backlash" which allegedly swept the country in 1971 and 1972. Whatever the reason, the specialization of reportage on poverty matters clearly began to decline.

At the Toronto Star, David Allen was reassigned to the Queen's Park bureau and the poverty beat downgraded. When Sheila Arnopoulos, a senior reporter who had been covering poverty issues on a full-time basis, left the Montreal Star, she was succeeded by a more junior staffer for whom the poverty beat was to be combined with other assignments. Shortly after Ken Kelly left Canadian Press' Ottawa bureau, the bureau, faced with a manpower shortage, decided to leave its welfare beat vacant.

Kathy Tait is a reporter in British Columbia. She covered poverty for the Vancouver Province during the years that the media discovered it and the years that it again forgot it. She was never full-time on the poverty beat. She was a general news reporter and, when the City Desk sent her to fires or on police calls, she covered fires and police calls. But for almost four of her six years with the Province she concentrated on poverty news, from the Legislature and City Hall to the tenement and street corner. We asked her observations on the rise and fall of poverty reporting in British Columbia.

Reporting of poverty in any consistent manner started in British Columbia about four years ago. Until then, B.C.'s major dailies, the Vancouver Province and the Vancouver Sun, only reported poverty or issues involving welfare when they hit them over the head. If, by accident, a reporter stumbled on a good story, which happened to involve poverty, he would report it and his paper would publish it. Also, stories coming from official sources of some importance could not be ignored.

But this kind of reporting, or lack of it, did nothing to help the public realize that poverty was a reality in affluent British Columbia. Poverty to most people consisted of isolated cases which the media uncovered occasionally. Certainly, nobody saw poverty as a subject for regular, in-depth treatment. There was a prevailing feeling that "the poor will always be with us". Most reporters like to feel that the evil they expose will be corrected. But the problem of poverty would require more than one or two hard-hitting stories. There would be no overnight satisfaction.

It was in 1969 that the Vancouver dailies started taking more than a cursory glance at the situation. Three elements contributed to this beginning. The poor were organizing at a tremendous speed. Activist groups throughout the province were forming almost every day. They were angry. And for the first time poor people were willing to speak publicly. They did not refuse to have their names attached to their words and actions.

At the same time, unemployment was rising and governments were feeling its effects. Since most readers are also taxpayers, stories about how their taxes are being managed or mis-managed is always news.

Along with these two developments, a few reporters were becoming increasingly interested in the situation. At first, editors were reluctant to allow reporters time to look into developments and

get stories on poverty. Occasionally they would be downright antagonistic. But they eventually came to realize that some of the poverty stories they received were better than the stories they had assigned. Slowly, editors came to accept poverty as news and expected their welfare reporters to be on top of the situation.

Poverty and welfare stories were at first played timidly in the papers. But as the news value of the stories increased and with some hard bitching right to the top of management at poor play on good stories, poverty news often hit page one and enjoyed good layout. Only occasionally did any editor attempt to change the copy because his middle-class sensibilities were offended. Fortunately, such plans were usually discovered in advance and interference was argued against successfully.

The absence of any editorial interference was of utmost importance to welfare reporters because at first the poor were, without exception, suspicious of the media. They saw it as powerful, rich and biased against them. Even if they trusted a particular reporter, they had an almost paranoid fear that editors and other powers would twist a story to fit a particular point of view. In order to convince the poor that this would not happen, complete understanding had to be elicited from the news desk that any editing should be discussed with the reporter, a cumbersome process that disappeared as trust was fostered.

At the same time, reporters gave no promises or even intimations that the poor would receive any special favorable treatment. When the question arose, it was made clear that a reporter's job is to tell the story the way he sees it, as accurately and fairly as possible and with all differing points of view presented.

The arrangements proved workable and the poor found that many of their fears were unfounded. Even when one of the newspapers printed a most unfavorable report on page one about a provincial poverty conference, nobody argued that it should have been written or played in any other way.

Although the Province saw fit to send this reporter to the January 1971 Poor People's Conference in Toronto when it could have used Southam wire copy, neither the Province nor the Sun allowed interested reporters to do poverty reporting as a full-time beat, claiming it could not be afforded.

Both the Sun and the Province tend to follow each other. If the Province comes out in the morning with a story, the Sun's news desk assigns "a matcher" or "a follow". And vice versa. Sometimes Province poverty stories were published in the Sun almost word for word. After a while of this (Province print, Sun match), the Sun started assigning reporters to cover upcoming welfare events. The Sun tried in one excellent series of welfare stories to cover lost ground. But consistent poverty reporting in the Sun never lasted very long.

With the increase in poverty news, television and radio - forever starting their day with a newspaper in hand - got involved. The television cameras increasingly went to news conferences, demonstrations, sit-ins, and confrontations. At one point the poverty movement could demand and get a representative from every Lower Mainland newspaper, television and radio station at a news conference. The poor were hot news.

But as 1971 wore on, news on poverty and welfare began to diminish - not because the media were no longer interested, but because the poor were making news to a lesser and lesser extent and because, in a sense, everything had been said.

The public had no excuse for not knowing what people on welfare received in their monthly cheques, why they were angry, how they lived, what their struggle involved, how they thought, and how their children were affected. By this time, the public knew well the aims of the poor. It knew what a guaranteed annual income was about. It had an opportunity to understand what was said in Senator Croll's poverty report. It was also presented with the solutions offered by Ian Adams et al in "The Real Poverty Report". And the public knew what the governments were doing and not doing.

With the election of the NDP in August 1972, welfare news resurfaced in B. C. But only in terms of official sources - welfare news that came out of the new legislature. The media reported the fact that old age pensions were increased to \$200 per month, as were the allowances of the disabled and handicapped on welfare. The media reported this year when all welfare rates in the province were increased. And they reported the government's intentions to improve day care and other children's services.

But the digging kind of poverty reporting appears to have gone. Has poverty suddenly disappeared with the election of the NDP? Is the new welfare legislation reaping real or imaginary benefits? Are people on welfare any better off with their increased rates than they were three years ago? Or has the increase merely defrayed the effects of inflation? Is the housing situation any better? Has the new government got some fresh ideas on low-income housing? Is the welfare bureaucracy still as cumbersome for the individual recipient? What are the poverty groups doing now? What further improvements might be expected from the government?

The questions are endless but they are not being asked. At least, there is no evidence that they are being asked judging by the current lack of news on the subject.

GOOD STORIES AND BAD STORIES

As Ms. Tait notes, there are many facets to how a newspaper does or doesn't cover poverty. There is the extent to which it reports the "official" news, how prominently it does so, and whether this half-story is left to stand alone. There is the time given or denied reporters to dig for stories, the willingness to print them, and the prominence they are given. There is the editing that is or isn't done to a story before it appears, and the headline

with which it is introduced. What appears in print reflects the sum total of these factors. But, unlike cake mixes, newspaper stories don't list their ingredients. The product of a fast, sloppy job of news gathering, written from a superficial perspective and edited from a bias for the sensational, looks entirely reputable to the average reader when he sees it in print.

We asked Ron Haggart to apply his journalist's assessment to some of the stories about poverty which have appeared in newspapers in the Toronto-Hamilton area, analyzing the things which distinguished the good stories and which marked the bad ones. In his report he cited several examples of very good reporting - creative, digging reportage which found the story behind the story and presented it to readers in an interesting, understandable fashion.

Examples of excellent work in the press serve to illustrate how effective the press can be, to the whole community and to the poverty community within it, when the press performs according to its own imagined standards of searching concern.

An outstanding example of professional journalistic technique used to provide worthwhile information in an interesting fashion was Paul Mann's account in the Hamilton Spectator entitled, "The 'Black Knight' Goes to White Man's Aid". The technique was that of personalizing the news, of viewing events through the eyes of one participant, in this case a black community leader in Hamilton who was an unemployed garbage employee then on welfare.

Mann's account lacked any tinge of the charity attitude so often found in the press. His subject was "dependent again on the system he despises". Through the eyes of his subject, Mann skilfully portrayed

all the objections of the disadvantaged to the welfare system, so-called urban renewal and the ministrations of middle-class charity organizations.

Whether one agrees or not with the point of view professed by the "black knight" of Mann's story, no reader of the Spectator could help but learn from it that human dignity is the central issue of the poverty problem, that intelligent and useful advice can be found from the members of the poverty community, and that the administration of a welfare system is far more complex than the "hand-out" philosophy so often reflected in other press accounts.

One of the writers mentioned most frequently and most favorably by those connected with the poverty community is David Allen who, for three years, covered the poverty beat for the Toronto Star.

When the tenants of a public housing project in Toronto demonstrated at the offices of the housing authority the Toronto Star reported the demonstrations, of course, but reporter Allen also took the trouble to go back to the site of the housing project from which the demonstrators had come. He discovered that the children, in a family housing project, had almost no space in which to play, and no equipment. They spilled out into the adjoining streets of owner-occupied houses and caused neighbourhood tensions. There can be no doubt that the demonstrations at the agency office took on new meaning in the city of Toronto and were understood in a new light by ordinary citizens, because Allen described the facts and the attitudes which lay behind them.

Picket lines, demonstrations, and confrontations are always arguable tactics, but at least in this instance and in many others, Allen gave his readers both the "automatic" story of the physical events and the "digging" story of the facts that lay behind them, and his readers could reach their conclusions (or, indeed, decide to reach no conclusion at all) on the basis of a thorough and comprehensive survey.

While his analysis of specific examples was limited to papers in the Toronto-Hamilton area, Haggart noted that, along with David Allen (who no longer covers poverty for the Toronto Star), Sheila Arnopoulos (who no longer covers the poverty beat for the Montreal Star) and Roger Bellefeuille of Le Soleil in Quebec City are often cited as leading students of poverty among journalists.

Their work is notable for its cogent analysis of the politics of the welfare system, for their utter lack of "charity" bias and for their ability to analyze government programs with the same dispassionate clarity a newspaper's Mining Editor might adopt when dealing with petroleum policy. Few papers have encouraged the development of such skills.

Le Soleil is the only newspaper of its size to maintain a full-time social affairs beat. It regularly gives extensive coverage to social policy questions and often reprints substantial extracts when major reports are issued in this field. Its reporter, Roger Bellefeuille, holds a Master of Social Work degree. We asked him his views on poverty reporting and his experience as a poverty reporter.

The newspaper reporter assigned to the social policy sector quickly comes to recognize that subjects such as income security and social services cannot be considered without the whole range of social inequalities and manifestations of poverty being raised.

Society has developed a double standard by which it applies one measure to the poor and quite another to the more privileged sectors of the community. Thus, if a welfare recipient receives a

few hundred dollars "too much", this is described as "fraud", and he or she is dragged before a court. If a doctor receives medicare payments apparently incompatible with his actual practice, this is referred to as "abuse". Recourse to judicial tribunals is discarded - the Quebec Minister recently described such a possibility as "odious" - and instead a special Review Board is envisaged, with a majority of its members to be fellow doctors.

Quebec's 7,000 doctors last year received \$327 million in medicare payments while 500,000 poor people in families receiving welfare got slightly more than \$350 million. When there had been mention in the National Assembly of welfare "fraud", a heated debate ensued, with reference to "scandals" and armies of "parasites" living off the state. When, recently, the Minister told the Assembly of manifest "abuses" of the medicare program, his revelation was received in uncomfortable silence.

In a healthy democratic system, we should normally expect all sectors of the population to have at least a relative equality of access to society's various collective mechanisms. The press, in both its print and electronic forms, is an important component of these collective social mechanisms. But, as with all important institutions, the press cannot ignore economic and socio-economic pressures.

Given the presence of unequal forces, it inevitably gives priority to information emanating from the majority, or corresponding to the majority's values. Moreover, public and para-public organizations, as well as private enterprise, are increasingly investing in public relations programs which have the effect of reinforcing this inequality of influence. The obvious long-term consequence of this is a diminishing importance for the voice of the poor and the underprivileged, which hardly contributes to making the welfare reporter's job easier.

Another very prosaic fact is that newspapers are profit-making ventures that must, as a consumer product, take their competition into account. Their readership is largely recruited from among the middle and upper income classes. Obviously, a sensational article or sob story appealing to the emotions of the average reader "sells" much better than an analysis of the causes of poverty.

But a sensational approach has little effect in decreasing social inequalities. It is similar to lifting a bandage to show the open wound; the reader feels a superficial and short-lived emotion. This titillation brings distraction from the boredom of his life and contributes to his appreciation of it as good quiet comfort. It may also confirm him in his judgement that the poor are first and foremost responsible for their own misery while he has earned his comfort.

To the poor themselves, the sensational approach mirrors their destitution and contributes to their deep-rooted feeling of being nothing but consumer objects. This contributes to increasing their legitimate feelings of frustration and provoking latent aggressiveness.

This superficial sensational approach to poverty encourages its continuing to be perceived in a very limited fashion. But poverty, in fact, has a thousand and one faces: it is economic, cultural, and social; it is personal and collective. Legislative, administrative and institutional plans all have their impacts upon it.

Ideally, the welfare reporter should strive for a happy balance, being both factual and critical, in reporting on the legislative, administrative and institutional aspects of measures directed at alleviating poverty and social inequality. This is not an easy task and, ideally, it should not be done by a single reporter, but rather by a team of reporters.

In the last few years we have seen the creation of citizens' committees and popular groups among the poor. The poverty reporter knows by experience that his credibility is very low with the poor, due to their justified distrust of everyone they associate with the "Establishment". And in their eyes, the press is an integral part of it, and must therefore be dealt with carefully.

The social dedication of the press is very much in question because, whether it knows it or not, by the very nature of its function it is, or can be, an important agent of social change. The extent of the coverage that Le Soleil has seen fit to provide in this field indicates an awareness of its responsibilities.

It is the main newspaper in the Quebec City area and the whole eastern region of the province, with a circulation of 170,000. It was the only French-language newspaper represented at the national Poor People's Conference in Toronto, in January 1971, and at the Conference of Provincial Ministers of Welfare in Victoria, British Columbia, in November 1972. Both of these were major events in the evolution of new orientations toward poverty and social security in Canada.

In recent years a number of the larger daily newspapers have begun to make the significant step of reassessing both the nature of their health and welfare coverage and the nature of their women's or family pages. The relegation of health and welfare stories to such sections, and the nature of the treatment they received there, reflected the tenacity of the "charity" approach to poverty and social inequality. It was as if these realities were of interest only to charity-minded club-women, middle class ladies' organizations and family-oriented housewives.

The result of such a reassessment by Le Soleil is that, for all practical purposes, its "family pages" have been abolished. It has been recognized that the fate of the disadvantaged must be a concern of businessmen, tradesmen, professionals and technocrats, as well as citizen organizations of all kinds, and that social problems and economic problems are very much intertwined.

The reporter assigned to the social policy sector, if he is to cover it at all adequately, must be given a free hand to seek out information from the poor themselves as well as from official sources. Because poor people's organizations have scanty resources, he must be enabled to do much of the research which they cannot themselves provide, in order that their story can be presented in a fair fashion when seen against that of the authorities. He must enjoy a true freedom of speech.

I have been very fortunate in the conditions of my own experience at Le Soleil. I have been free to do such research; I have been free from being edited; and I have been free to have commentaries published in which I offered opinions which contradicted those which appeared that same day on the editorial page.

When important conferences on welfare have taken place, whether in Toronto, Ottawa, or even such distant centres as Victoria, Le Soleil has enabled me to be present. Because a specialist reporter must keep himself well-informed on his specialty, in the summer of 1972 Le Soleil granted me a five-week paid study leave to investigate recent developments in the social policy programs of France and England. I think it can fairly be said that Le Soleil has treated the reporting of social policy as a subject of major importance.

In his discussion of good reporting Ron Haggart stressed the need to dig for the story that is the hidden iceberg without which its exposed tip is at best meaningless and, at worst, highly misleading. Lack of such digging - describing effects without their causes - produces stories which represent bad reporting, misleading not for what they say or how they say it, but for what they leave unsaid.

But bad reporting is not always limited to such sins of omission. Too often it is compounded by sins of commission - some of them even well meant. The problem of sensationalism, for example, loomed large when Ron Haggart turned to examples of bad reporting. It involves both the reporting of sensational events which actually happened - but happened only because no other way of gaining press attention was seen - and unsensational events rendered sensational by the manner in which they were reported.

With the problem of "sensationalism", it is always necessary to return to the chicken-and-egg conundrum. Does the press concentrate narrowly on physical confrontation or do action groups exploit a weakness that might otherwise be surmounted? Without a doubt, poverty groups, among many others, stage events simply for press attention. Sit-ins at the mayor's office, chaining children to a house that is to be torn down, sleeping in the park to demonstrate poor housing conditions, would all seem rather useless if the press didn't cover them. Many poverty representatives contend they would not resort to such tactics if the press did a good job of investigative reporting. "The press won't pay any attention to you if you don't do something outlandish", say leaders in the poverty community.

The trouble with "doing something outlandish" is, of course, that a newspaper or any other public agency may make an issue out of the tactics rather than the cause they represent. A classic example occurred with the Hamilton Spectator's treatment of the Hamilton Welfare Rights Organization.

The organization was chosen by the Department of National Health and Welfare (the Minister at that time was John Munro whose constituency is in Hamilton) to receive \$105,000 over three years to hire organizers, set up an office and generally assist in identifying poverty problems.

In January of 1971, the group demonstrated in front of Hamilton City Hall as part of a nation-wide day of protest by the poor. They attempted to set up a table to advise welfare recipients in the welfare office and refused to leave when asked. Whatever one's viewpoint might be, the incidents were decidedly tame.

The tone of coverage in the Spectator may safely be described as indignant. Huge headlines topped a story which began:

The federal government is giving
\$105,000 to the people who held
a sit-in at the city welfare
offices this week.

That sentence, and the emphasis given it by display and typography, represents a clear example of the way in which the journalistic cult of objectivity may be used to project bias.

Every statement contained in that single, forthright sentence is true. Yet it is not difficult to detect the malice which lies behind it, and the assumptions which lie behind the malice go to the very heart of public attitudes, and press attitudes, toward the poverty community. That single

sentence presupposes that there should be an atmosphere of gratitude and subservience associated with public assistance. The assumption is that those who receive public assistance in the area generally regarded as welfare should not, for that reason alone, then break the law and take the consequences. Even assuming that to "sit-in" is to break the law, an assumption The Spectator was to make repeatedly in both news and editorial columns, the Spectator constantly used "the law" as a club to beat the welfare demonstrators.

Analogies are always difficult and inexact, but the Spectator might have asked itself one question: Would a City Editor ever pass a lead sentence of a news story which read:

The XYZ Steel Corp., accused
yesterday of polluting Hamilton
Harbour, received \$6 million
in accelerated depreciation tax
benefits last year.

That sentence would not be passed by the Spectator's City Editor unless it was as a quotation from someone else. It is argumentative and conclusionary; indeed, the assumption is at the base of David Lewis' widely quoted campaign against "corporate welfare bums". Strangely, the argumentative statement a newspaper would insist must come from some other source when used against corporations was quite acceptable as "news" when directed against welfare recipients.

The controversy then raged into side issues: The Minister's supposed snub to Hamilton's mayor because he didn't explain the project in detail, the City Council's refusal to allow the group's table in the welfare office. One wonders how much of this controversy genuinely originated with the public officials concerned and how much was originated by (1) direct inquiry by the newspaper or (2) encouraged by the response of ample space to every official utterance.

The scientific principle that the act of observation may change the situation being observed is as true when applied to newspapers (and even more so to television) as it is in the laboratory, when the necessary lights change the matter being observed by microscope. It is a truth which journalists often prefer to ignore. They do so at their peril, since this truth lies at the heart of the criticism that the press concerns itself with an unreal and self-engendered world.

It was remarkable how closely the editorial (opinion) articles followed the line of the news stories (or was it the other way around). Said one editorial:

Probably the ugliest feature of the organization's performance is the fact that it's paid for by the Canadian taxpayers.

The assumptions made by both the news and editorial writers in the one-paper city of Hamilton were exactly the same.

Although this report is not concerned with editorial (opinion) articles, it is instructive to reflect on one of the Spectator's editorials on this matter:

Hamilton has had enough of the bullying, harassing, street-gang tactics of the 'Hamilton Welfare Rights Organization'. The outfit's performance in abusing a public official on Thursday went far beyond the acceptable limits of civilized behaviour ... Thanks to the generosity of those who pay taxes, the 'organization' has been able to conduct a number of projects - the name-calling spectacles at the welfare office, the picketing of the Salvation Army hostel. If the trouble-makers can't be flushed out - and fast - then government funds should be cut off. Instantly. There are too many useful demands on the Canadian taxpayer without requiring him to finance rowdiness, bullying and threats.

All this outpouring was occasioned by a single incident: the harassment of a housing official by attempting to prevent him from leaving his office after he had specified which members of a delegation he would permit to interview him. One can easily identify the trigger, emotional words: "generosity", and "outfit" and the constant use of the word organization in quotation marks to give it questionable legitimacy. Their importance here is that the news coverage followed the same direction: The news coverage was largely devoted to the "confrontation" (mild as it was) to the virtual exclusion of the issues involved in the confrontation. News of the confrontation was automatic; to explain the objective situation lying behind it - as David Allen had done in the very much similar situation in Toronto - would have required more digging.

While any judgements in this area must be highly subjective, it has often been remarked that relationships and attitudes touching the press and the poor reached some kind of a watershed at the first Poor People's Conference in Toronto in 1971. The conference media committee at first decided that all sessions would be closed to the press (no doubt as a result of the experiences and attitudes to be found elsewhere in this report). After discussion, a compromise was reached: The press were allowed into general sessions, but not to workshops.

As if in perfect justification of this attitude, the Globe and Mail started things off with a story which has become a classic of its kind. A reporter describing the scene at the hotel as the conference got under way, attempted to show that poor people are like everybody else. In a brief reference well down in his story he noted that, like anybody else at a convention, they even have a few drinks in the bar. The story was headed:

Bar Business Brisk as 450 Check
Into Simcoe for Convention

The headline lasted one edition and was changed after a delegation visited the newspaper office which, conveniently, was next door to the hotel.

Peter Worthington of the Toronto Telegram composed another classic, asserting that the Praxis Corp., one of the conference organizers, was run by SDS-style (Students for a Democratic Society) radicals. The Hamilton Spectator's inability to accept the reality of a conference of poor people was reflected in one news paragraph which said:

Wearing clothes ranging from cotton print dresses to glamorous pantsuits and from T-shirts and blue jeans to well-tailored suits, they attended 13 workshops.

The class bias, the attitude of "them" rather than "us" is rampant in that single sentence. Perhaps, in early 1971, any pantsuit seemed glamorous to a reporter from Hamilton. Was the clothing expensive? Perhaps not, since even pantsuits were by that time mass-produced. Did the wearer of the pantsuit even purport to be poor? (Perhaps she was a deputy minister from somewhere.) But the implications that the whole thing was a little phoney, and rather distinctly odd, permeates that sentence.

After a day or so, stories from this first Poor People's Conference began to change in tone. Perhaps it was that the reporters now had other matters to concentrate on besides the demands for "advance" stories which (as with pantsuits and bars) often turn out to be non-stories. In any event, the later coverage of the Poor People's Conference became considerably more serious and astutely analytical. When the government's cost of \$68,500 was mentioned, for example, the Montreal Star brought out the fact that a dentist can spend \$2,000 in a week attending a convention and claim it as a tax deduction (i.e. they're subsidized).

The resolutions of the conference were reported in factual terms.

Many journalists believe the conference marked a turning point for press treatment of poverty. A one-time welfare reporter for the Toronto Telegram declared: "When you spend three days with 500 poor people, you begin to realize they're ... people."

Almost without exception, the few poverty specialists - general reporters permitted to concentrate sufficiently on poverty news to develop the expertise which comes of such an ongoing familiarity with a field - have been marked by the dedication described earlier by Ron Haggart: "a dedication to the concept that those who are powerless should have equal access to the facilities of a free press". The various poverty reporters mentioned earlier along with many others such as Wally Dennison of the Winnipeg Free Press, Mary Kate Rowan, formerly at the Globe and Mail and now at the Toronto Star, and Ken Whittingham, who now covers the poverty beat for the Montreal Star, have seen their roles as being more than mere observers and chroniclers. They have made themselves available to poor people's groups to teach such basic communication skills as how to prepare press releases and policy statements, endeavoring to make this concept of "equal access to the facilities of a free press" more real for those who have had virtually no access at all to it.

But apart from the consistent work of the handful of poverty specialists and the occasional piece from other sources, poverty stories in Canadian newspapers have tended to fit some one of three regular stereotypes. The first of these, the "official" report was discussed earlier, and the

dangers inherent in a reportage that relies on it, pointedly illustrated by Ken Kelly.

The second, sensationalism, was also referred to and discussed. It can take many forms. As Ron Haggart points out, there is the sensationalism which groups can be driven to adopt by a press which ignores anything less, and there is the manufactured sensationalism of the headline writer or city desk editor who transforms a straightforward presentation into one that is colorful, exciting - and misleading.

But the most destructive form of sensationalism is that which Roger Bellefeuille referred to, and which preys, vulture-like, on the lives of unfortunate individuals. It is the sensationalism that provides a literal picture of poverty with a photograph of a child, an old man, or perhaps a family, living in conditions calculated to repel the reader. It is the picture taken and used without any regard for the effect its use will have on its subjects. It is the ultimate embodiment of the "us" and "them" mentality. The degrading, dehumanizing effect on those in the picture of having their suffering thus exploited is ignored, for they are not an "us"; they are only a "them".

Closely related to this exploitation of suffering as sensationalism for sensationalism's sake alone is the third stereotype poverty story, a form of sensationalism perpetrated for the ego gratification that engaging in Victorian charity evidently provides the publishers and readers of many newspapers. This stereotype, the charity story, is found particularly at Christmas time, when newspaper columns abound with tales of starving urchins and destitute

families for whom there will be no Christmas without the hampers which readers' contributions will buy.

There is, perhaps, no form of charity more detested by those who have to suffer the indignity of accepting it than these Christmas hampers. The indignity begins with the process of application; frequently people have to wait for long periods of time only to be asked personal, embarrassing, and often irrelevant, questions. It is augmented when the hamper finally is given (if, that is, the family is found to be "worthy") by the unwanted or unusable items that offer testimony to the complete insensitivity of the donors to the needs - spiritual as well as physical - of the poor. And the indignity is crowned when, the following year, the newspaper dredges up the previous year's "cases" to be used for the next Christmas' series of maudlin solicitation articles.

AN ALTERNATE VIEW

Daily newspapers are not, of course, the only papers in Canada. Quite the contrary, in fact; there are only 121 dailies in all of Canada, compared with 916 weeklies. Many of these weeklies are in rural areas where the small local population is barely enough to sustain what is often a one man enterprise. Some are in the suburban areas of major metropolitan centres, meeting the interest of members of the suburban community for more news of its own local events than is provided by the metropolitan daily. More recently, such "neighborhood papers" have begun to appear in a number of older communities within large cities.

A similar interest in a more extensive or differently oriented reportage but of a particular subject rather than a particular community, is the basis for weeklies such as the financial papers. Thus the Financial Post, for example, provides those interested in commercial and financial matters with more extensive and detailed reporting of these subjects than they can find in their daily papers. Such papers also provide interpretive accounts and commentaries on events of general interest from a perspective which reflects the interests and orientations of their readers. They are thus a very "establishment" prototype for many of the new "alternate press" weeklies that now exist.

Some of these are in the "counter-culture" category and very much youth oriented. Some are more general and are directed at a broader cross-section of the population that is not satisfied with the news and perspective it finds in its daily papers. It is no doubt significant that one of the subjects given extensive coverage in such papers is poverty. And its reportage in these papers tends not only to be proportionately far more extensive, but very different in character. Where the daily paper's welfare story is likely to hew closely to the line of the official pronouncement, the story in the alternate press weekly is more likely to feature the commentary of the local welfare rights group on that pronouncement.

One of these papers is the 4th Estate in Halifax. It has a weekly press run of 13,800 (compared with the 45,000 and 75,000 circulations of the city's two dailies) and a full-time editorial staff of four, augmented by a part-time staff of one and 20 or so contributing writers

whose commentaries appear with differing degrees of regularity. Much of its coverage of poverty stories is provided by Pauline Janitch, one of its four full-time staffers. Her work is often supplemented by one or another of the paper's contributing writers (one of these is the director of a local social agency, another a professor at the school of social work). We asked Ms. Janitch how she saw the coverage of poverty by the press in Halifax.

Halifax is tea and sandwiches with dyed-pink fillings for evening sorority jewel-pinning ceremonies. Or, it is mayors and other prominent people smiling in front of an angel-stone fireplace at one of the city's more exclusive golf and country clubs.

We froth at the mouth whenever the "Feds" threaten to scratch Royal from "Mounted Police". But, we revive our drooping crests with wire service photographs of the Queen, resting at Windsor Castle in her country tweeds.

Our fists shake in mature anger at the mention of socialism, or even pacificism, and we're on a constant watch to see where it's creeping.

On a day-to-day basis, we follow the agenda at city council with an untiring, eagle's eye, running stories about rezonings, and budgets, and new sewage installations, and plans for more pre-fab classrooms.

Poverty exists in Halifax. We're the first to hear about welfare chisellers, and bums on Unemployment Insurance, and the last to find out about arbitrary or erroneous cut-offs. As summer slowly winds its way into Halifax, we step up our campaign for Rainbow Haven - a

newspaper-operated camp for "under-privileged" or "less fortunate" children. Our attitude toward the poor is benevolent and charitable.

This is Halifax. At least, the Halifax of our daily papers: the morning Chronicle-Herald which has the cock crowing "What Are You Going To Do For Nova Scotia Today?"; and the evening Mail-Star which tolls the knell of day with "What Did You Do For Nova Scotia Today?"

Both the Mail Star and the Chronicle-Herald are the only major dailies in the province. Both are owned by the Dennis family, and operate out of the same building with somewhat similar staff.

From about the late 1940's to the late '60's, the dailies flourished in a virtual print monopoly, with only a squeak of competition from a small weekly across the harbour - the Dartmouth Free Press. Now, their print competition comes from three papers: the Scotian Journalist, a biweekly with a somewhat sensationalist bent; the 4th Estate, a four-year old weekly, whose mandate, most simply put, is social change; and a much more aggressive and professional Dartmouth Free Press.

It is the Grand Old Lady monopoly position which many feel has contributed to a brand of journalism in the Halifax dailies that is entrenched in a turn-of-the-century world. A journalism that is meek and static. Brenda Large, associate editor of the 4th Estate says she feels, "the lack of adequate reporting in the dailies isn't a conscious attempt on the part of these papers, but rather a lack of awareness".

In its report, the Davey Senate Committee on the Media said of the Halifax dailies: "As a final entry in this random, and

admittedly, incomplete assortment of journalistic cop-outs, we must refer at some length to the situation in Halifax ... and there is probably no large Canadian city that is so badly served by its papers ... there is probably no news organization in the country that has managed to achieve such an intimate and uncritical relationship with the local power-structure, or has grown so indifferent to the need of its readers".

In Halifax, the problem has been papers that are tied into the quick and safe route for news - city council and provincial legislative beats, press conferences, and press releases. But it is also tired and complacent papers that will print a news release verbatim, and rarely go "behind the scenes" for their news.

A major impetus in the birth of The 4th Estate was the almost complete media bypass of coverage of the black community in the Halifax area - an area that has an extremely poor community of blacks sitting on its fringes (North Preston) and which, a few years ago, razed a black squatters' community to the ground (Africville), clearing the way for redevelopment. "When the paper was being formed, the daily papers' coverage of what was and wasn't happening in the black community was, in fact, non-existent", says Nick Fillmore, editor of the weekly.

The 4th Estate emerged as an "alternate" press, and saw as its mandate the need for social change, for more progressive and people-oriented policies in an underdeveloped region. It intended to act as a watchdog and critic of government policies, of social services, and of government planning.

Using Le Monde as a partial guide and model, the paper abandoned the concept of "straight" news coverage and jumped into advocacy journalism. Each news story, in essence, was a report and an editorial in one package.

It is probably fair to say that the paper can take some credit for the establishment of a Residential Tenancies Board (which enforces minimum housing standards for the province); and for the recent legalization of denturists in the province.

On an individual basis, there have been numerous direct successes. The paper recovered over \$800 in back pay for a hairdresser in Halifax who wasn't receiving the provincial minimum wage. A number of landlords in Halifax and Dartmouth have been pushed into meeting the minimum standards of city housing by-laws because of coverage in the paper.

It gives welfare recipients or Unemployment Insurance recipients the backing of the press which enables them to get through bureaucratic tangles more quickly. It has functioned as a referral center (through its HELP WANTED column) for people with legal and other difficulties who didn't know who to phone for advice. And, it has provided an alternate voice for a wide range of people and interests in the community who were either ignored by the dailies or who were the recipients of "slanted" coverage.

In a sense, the paper is dependent on people in the community for information, because of the shortage of staff and time. Strong tenants and welfare rights groups in the community can be a steady source of information for new stories. But, besides being a helpful source of news, strong community groups can reinforce poverty news coverage.

A small paper can publish endless editorials. It can continually push for changes in slum housing. It can print reams of stories about the inequities in our current system. But, without the necessary ingredient of citizen involvement, most issues can ultimately be brushed aside and ignored.

SEWING TOGETHER COMMON THREADS

Halifax, Quebec City, Ottawa, Toronto, Vancouver; French language, English language; daily press, weekly press, news service. The common threads that run through each of the accounts appear and reappear.

A daily newspaper is a major social institution. It cannot but be a part of the power structure of its community; its position within the community is too significant for it to be otherwise. And as such it will generally reflect the views of the other major socio-economic institutions of the community. This is not to suggest that the press is but a mouthpiece for a conspiracy of the powerful, or even that it will never find itself at odds with other institutional interests on given issues. It is simply a fact of its existence of which it must be aware.

A closely related reality is that the attitudes which its editorials, commentaries and choice and presentation of news stories reflects cannot be too far removed from the prevailing attitudes of its readers or it risks their ceasing to read it. Occasionally this mirroring of general community attitudes and power structure interests come into conflict. But only very occasionally; were it otherwise the erstwhile power structure would, by definition, no longer represent the structure of community power.

All of this would seem to bind itself into a depressingly tight, self-reinforcing little circle: the press reflects the views of those with power; the views of

the powerful shape those of the general community; the press mirrors the attitudes of the community. Where in this circular process of continuing self-reinforcement can new ideas be injected? How can anything be enabled to challenge the status quo and bring about a shift in attitudes throughout this seemingly closed system?

The answer lies in the press' concept of itself and the role which it has always seen itself playing, from the days when the first hand-set news sheets appeared. Through the years, great newspapers have in fact played this role, and with telling effect.

According to Napoleon Bonaparte: "A journalist is a grumbler, a censorer, a giver of advice, a regent of sovereigns, a tutor of nations. Four hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets." Richard Nixon might well agree.

The 19th century British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli contended that: "The press is not only free, it is powerful ... and, with an immortal instinct, it has always worked for the people." And, at the turn of the century, Sir Clifford Sifton, founder and publisher of the Winnipeg Free Press is reported to have instructed his editor, John Dafoe, that: "It is no part of a newspaper's function to defend a corporation; it is always able to defend itself."

It is this view of the role of the press, sincerely held by publishers, editors and dedicated reporters, coexisting uncomfortably with the socio-economic realities described above, which is the basis for seeing the press as a potential agent for social change. And in many areas it has been;

crusading and vigilant it has served its self-proclaimed function well. But not in the area of poverty reporting.

Ron Haggart states that in this field: "The failure of the press is only partly its failure to inform others; its greatest failure is its failure to inform itself." In Pauline Janitch's report from Halifax the absence of poverty reporting in that city's dailies is attributed not to a conscious omission but to a simple "lack of awareness". Kathy Tait says of West Coast papers that "nobody saw poverty as a subject for regular, in-depth treatment"; that poverty issues were reported when "by accident, a reporter stumbled on a good story". This same term was used by Ken Kelly in describing how the persistent violation by provinces of the appeals requirement of the Canada Assistance Plan was ended only after it was exposed in the press through a reporter having "finally stumbled" on the fact, "years too late to help hundreds of welfare recipients victimized by arbitrary or unfair administrative decisions and robbed of their right to appeal".

Ron Haggart, Kathy Tait and Roger Bellefeuille all noted the distrust and suspicion with which the press is viewed by the poor. Ms. Tait described the "almost paranoid fear that editors and other powers would twist a story to fit a particular point of view". Mr. Bellefeuille noted that "the poverty reporter knows by experience that his credibility is very low with the poor, due to their justified distrust of everyone they associate with the 'Establishment'", and the press is seen as "an integral part" of this.

It is doubtful that many senior editors of Canadian newspapers are aware of how they are seen by the poor. It is doubtful if they could comprehend it were they made aware. They are that far removed from so considerable a segment of the community they purport to serve.

Poverty in Canada is real. It is not a sideshow on which the curtain can be periodically raised, then dropped again when the audience's interest wanes. Until we have done the things that will need be done, it will continue to be the "national disgrace" that the Economic Council of Canada called it, an ugly, ongoing part of the Canadian reality - the only part for more than five million Canadians.

Newspaper social pages are filled day after day with accounts of the world of the well-to-do. Who became engaged to whom, and where and when the nuptials are to be celebrated, is dutifully recorded in each day's issue. Financial pages report on the implications for business, large and small, of every shift in the economic barometer, every announcement or speculation of government policy. Writers, knowledgeable of their fields, dig, report, and analyze. No editor would imagine sending a non-expert to cover a financial story - or even a sports story. But this is the regular fate of poverty stories. The event is recorded by whomever happens to be at hand, however great his lack of knowledgeability in the field.

It is a common complaint of poor people's groups that when their views are not being ignored they are often being misrepresented. A good reporter who specializes in

a field prides himself on his network of contacts and his familiarity with its organizational structures. A reporter with neither contacts nor organizational awareness in an unfamiliar field is likely to quote the person with the loudest voice. Such media-annointed "spokesmen of the poor" may not only distort what the public is led to believe are the views of organizations of the poor, but they misshape the public's image of these organizations as well.

In retrospect it is clear that the 1969-71 era of increased poverty reporting was, for many papers, a well-intentioned fad, rather than the beginning of an ongoing effort born of a recognition of their failure to perform their role in this area according to the standards they would claim for themselves. It is apparent that the central notion - that of the need of a real expertise - was never understood. While poverty was "in" and making news, many papers were willing to invest reporters' time in it. When the stories had all been told - once - the reporters were moved on to other things.

But this should not have been seen as the end of it, rather it should have been seen as the beginning. Poverty reporting is not just a one-shot series of stories about poor people. As Ron Haggart observes: "It is demonstrably true that the newspapers of Canada have far more editorial employees knowledgeable of the oil and gas industries and the stock market than they have employees with insights into the facts of the poverty community. It is demonstrably true and it is indefensible."

Roger Bellefeuille contends that if the real world of Canada's five million poor is to be covered

properly, then all aspects of the social policy field - from the slums to the Legislature - should be covered in an integrated fashion. And for this, one poverty specialist cannot be adequate; a team approach is required. We would agree. We would like to see social policy departments - like sports departments and entertainment departments - created on newspapers, with a team of reporters working together under a social policy editor.

It is interesting to note that the papers that have moved closest to this approach, papers such as *Le Devoir* and *Le Soleil*, have done so in part by ending the traditional "women's section". *Le Devoir*, for example, has a section on "fashion". It also has a section on "social affairs" - in the "Department of Social Affairs" sense of the term, not the forthcoming nuptials sense. It does not treat health and welfare issues as if they, along with betrothals, recipes and clothes, were part of a special world of women to be recorded from the "women's angle".

To the extent that papers are not prepared to go this far, the very least they must do is recognize the need for the development of knowledgeability and expertise by designating one or more reporters to develop specialized competence and contacts in the poverty field. Even if such a reporter must occasionally be sent to cover a fire or a police call, it is essential that all poverty stories be covered by reporters who know their subject. A good reporter, interested in the issues and concerned to ensure that the interests of the poor and powerless are served by a press that is as open to their world as to that of the rich and powerful - if he is supported in this by his editors - can do much.

This report can only conclude where it began, with the manifest truths offered, respectively, by the Senate Committee on Poverty and the Task Force on Government Information. Poverty will be ended in Canada only when prevailing public attitudes have been changed and "cherished myths" ... given final public burial", but this will not happen as long as people have "failed to receive the relevant information".

Canada's press is not today providing that relevant information. On the contrary, the information it is providing, and the way it is providing it, is reinforcing those myths. Instead of shattering icons, as its self-proclaimed role would have it do, it is encouraging their preservation. By failing to properly play the role it has appropriated to itself it is not only failing the five million Canadians who are poor; nor is it failing only the general Canadian community; but as an institution overwhelmingly composed of honest and sincere practitioners, it is failing itself.

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